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ABSTRACT

This study identified teachers' perceptions of violence in society and in schools and the responsibility of schools to help create a more civil society. Participants were 78 predominantly white elementary and secondary teachers taking a graduate class at a Texas university. Each participant completed a survey instrument, "Are Schools Responsible for a Civil Society?" that focused on teachers' perceptions of violence in society and in the schools and asked about the causes of violence and civil disobedience, types of violence they witnessed most often, who they believed was responsible for developing a civil society, and the extent to which their schools or districts provided staff development for teachers and/or students. The final question asked what message they would like the outside world to get about the school's responsibility for violence prevention in society. Most teachers felt violence had increased in society and in their schools in recent years. About three-quarters of the teachers surveyed said schools had organized programs in place to deal with the problem. Just over half felt the primary cause of the increase in violence was lack of parental influence (followed by media influence). Nearly 60 percent believed that schools were extremely responsible for helping develop a civil society. Less than half had any training at all on the issue. The survey instrument is attached. (SM)

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Building a Civil Society: Are Schools Responsible?

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1

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Purpose

The National Institute for Dispute Resolution (NIDR, 1997) recently reported that there are over 8,500 school based conflict resolution programs located in the nation's 86,000 schools. The purpose of this study is to determine if the impact of these programs is significant enough, both empirically and qualitatively, to warrant further infusion into public school systems.

Background

Today, more than ever, serious conflicts in our homes, classrooms, businesses, political arenas, on our streets, and even in our religious institutions seem to be inevitable. People of **all** ages and of all socioeconomic classes now appear more stressed and overreactive a great deal of the time. Why? Is it the pace of our world? Is it the growing conspicuousness between what <u>is</u> and what <u>ought</u> to be? Is it the loss of hope for a better life as some current psychologists contend? Regardless of the reason, individuals are rarely given any training, or even have an awareness of, the many factors involved in conflict management and effective mediation skills and its impact on our daily lives.

Many national, state, local, and independent task forces have done extensive background work and have provided recommendations for change in redirecting our violence prone citizenry (Carnegie, 1995; NIDR, 1997, Peace Education Foundation, 1994). NIDR (1997, p. 5) states, "One-half of all violence against teenagers occurs in school buildings, on school property or on the street in the vicinity of schools." Most of us are acutely aware of the crisis status in our nation regarding American youth, especially the apparent willingness to use violence as a means of resolving their conflicts. Families, schools, and community organizations were the three primary support systems traditionally responsible for delivering strategies to our young to help them become productive and successful citizens. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that schools are being forced to assume more and more of the responsibility for teaching an economically and ethnically diverse population the skills necessary for maintaining a peaceful community. While there seems to be widespread enthusiasm and an increase in training programs for training students and teachers in successful conflict resolution and peer mediation, empirical evidence regarding the impact of such training is not well documented.

Methodology

This research study was designed to generate descriptive data which identified teachers' perceptions of violence in our society, in their schools, and the responsibility of schools in creating a more civil society.

<u>Participants.</u> There were seventy-eight elementary, middle school, and high school teacher

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participants who had completed at least one full year of classroom teaching and who were enrolled in graduate classes at a local public university in northeast Texas. The ethnicity of the groups was primarily Caucasian (N= 70), African Americans (N=8), with no other minority populations identified. All teacher participants were employees of seven different urban or suburban school districts located in northeast Texas.

Instrument. A survey instrument, Are School's Responsible for a Civil Society? (Stetson & Stetson, 1998) was distributed to the participants in March of 1998. The surveys were anonymous and participants were asked to fill out the survey and return it the same evening. The focus questions of the survey dealt with teachers' perceptions of violence in our society in general, and in their schools in particular. Further questions involved their perceptions of the primary causes of violence and civil disobedience, types of violence they witness most often, who they believe were responsible for developing a civil society, and the extent to which their schools or school districts provide staff development or training for teachers and/or students. The final question asked the teachers what message they would like the "outside" world to know about the school's responsibility for violence prevention in our society. Survey responses were aggregated and reduced by category. Categories were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Results were tabulated by frequency and percentage distribution.

Results / Conclusions

The attached Survey Results Report summarizes data from the Are Schools Responsible for a Civil Society Survey (Stetson & Stetson, 1998). Comments from participating teachers are also included. Findings are reported for each of the ten categories within the survey. Group data used to test the comparisons include the mean scores of the respondents and the overall percentage rates of each of the items.

The first few questions on the survey asked generic questions about whether civil disobedience in schools within the United States had increased or decreased in the past five years. Ninety-five percent of the respondents replied that they felt violence had increased. A follow-up question asked them if they thought violence in *their schools* had increased or decreased. Eighty-four percent thought that violence or civil disobedience had increased in their schools.

Seventy-one percent of the teachers surveyed said schools or school districts had some type of organized conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation program in place. It is interesting to note that while the teachers report, and current research supports their experience that violence is increasing in America's schools, and the majority also report they have some type of organized conflict management on their campuses, then one might wonder if the programs are working or if the disturbances might be even worse if they did not have these programs in place.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of teachers (51%) also felt that the primary cause of the increase in violence in society and in the schools was due to parental influence (or lack of). This was followed by the influence of television and the media (23%), personal responsibility of the students (15%), and gangs (8%). Other influences (e.g., boredom, video games, and other) each received less than 1% of the responses.

When asked to what extent the schools were responsible for developing a civil society, 58% percent of the teachers reported that the schools were extensively responsible. The categories of "Quite a bit" and "Some" each received 21% of the responses. Not a single teacher indicated that the schools had "No responsibility at all" for developing a civil society.

Since the teachers reported that they felt the schools were overwhelmingly responsible for developing a civil society, and most also reported their schools had an organized program of conflict resolution or peer mediation, then to what extent did their schools or school districts provide training or staff development in this area? Forty-eight percent of the teachers said their school campus or school district provided only "some" training; followed next by "hardly any", which received 23% of the responses. Eight percent reported their campuses or districts didn't provide any training at all. Only 5% reported extensive training in their schools (Table 3).

Table 4 lists the types of disobedience or violence teachers reported they experience most often. Forty-eight percent indicated that verbal disrespect was the most frequent form of disruption they experience on a regular basis. This was followed closely by the "disrespect for authority" (35%), and, "refusal to do work" (16%).

Table 5 reports the participants' responses to, " who should be providing teachers with training in conflict resolution and peer mediation?" Forty-seven percent said school districts should provide teachers' training in conflict resolution. Twenty-three percent thought their school campuses should provided the training, and fourteen percent thought that preservice teacher training institutions should include this type of training in their certification programs.

The survey asked open-ended questions of the teachers about what message they would like to send to the "outside world" about this topic. Table 6 reports their quoted comments.

Conclusions

The majority of respondents in this study report that violence in their schools is increasing even though they have some type of formal conflict management program in place. Teachers reported that the most frequent type of disruption or civil disobedience they experience is verbal disrespect, followed closely by disregard for authority and students' refusal to do work.

The teachers' overwhelmingly feel that parents are the primary cause of the increasing violence and civil disobedience they are experiencing; yet, they also believe schools should be primarily responsible for creating a civil society. While they believe their schools should be doing more, the majority of teachers (79%) reported that they had received very little training in this area.

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Are Schools Responsible for a Civil Society?
Survey Results Report

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Janet Kelly, Texas Christian University

Demographic Data

Number of Teachers: 78
Teaching Levels: Elementary 88% Secondary: 10% All Level: 2%
Number of School Districts: Seven, (urban and suburban)

- **95% of teacher's surveyed believe civil disobedience in schools within the United States has increased in the past five years.**
- **84% of teacher's surveyed believe civil disobedience WITHIN their schools has increased in the past five years.**
- **71% of teacher's surveyed report their schools have some type of organized program of conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation in place.**

Table 1. Teachers' responses to the primary cause(s) of violence in schools and society.

Rank Order	Item	Percentage of Respondents Rating This Item as the Primary Cause
1	Parents	51 %
2	Television and Media	23 %
3	Personal Responsibility (students)	15 %
4	Gang Influences	8 %
5	Boredom (in school or out)	<1 %
6	Video Games	<1 %
7	Other (lack of religion, morals, God)	<1 %

Table 2. Teachers' responses to the extent they believe schools are responsible for developing a civil society.

Rank Order	Item	Percentage of Respondents Rating These Items
1	Extensive	58 %
2	Quite a Bit	21 %
3	Some	21 %
4	Not at All	0

Table 3. Teachers' responses to the extent their school campus or district provides staff development in conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation.

Rank Order	Item	Percentage of Respondents Rating These Items
1	Extensive	5 %
2	Quite a Bit	18 %
3	Some	48 %
4	Hardly Any	23 %
	Not at All	8 %

Table 4. Teachers' responses to the type of civil disobedience problems they experience most often.

Rank Order	Item	Percentage of Respondents Rating These Items
1	Verbal disrespect	48 %
2	Disregard for authority	35 %
3	Refusal to do work	16 %
4	Threats of violence	<1 %
5	Physical attacks	<1 %
6	Other (students against students)	<1 %

Table 5. Teachers' responses to who should be providing teachers with training in conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation.

Rank Order	Item	Percentage of Respondents Rating These Items
1	School districts	47 %
2	School campuses	23 %
3	Preservice teacher training	14 %
4	Individual teacher's responsibility	8 %
5	Outside consultants	1 %
6	Regional education service centers	1 %
7	Social service agencies	1 %
8	Law enforcement agencies	1 %

Table 6. Teachers' responses when asked what message they would like to send to the outside world about the schools' responsibility for violence prevention in our society.

"When parents don't expect students to be responsible for their actions, violence prevention in schools becomes almost impossible."
"It is not only a school problem. Parents and children must take responsibility."
"We all better get busy now and fix this!"
"It begins at home."
"That it takes all aspects (schools, home, community) to make a civil society."
"It begins at home."
"Get involved in a positive way and don't hurt kids."
"Spend time with your children, go to church, model preventing violence in our homes."
"We can teach children about acceptable behavior but ultimately it is the family's responsibility to teach their children."
"As part of a "civilized" society, we are entrusted with students for a good portion of their waking hours. It is the school's responsibility to provide training for students."
"Get real and reach out to parents."
"Schools should be a resource in decreasing violence in our society. Sole responsibility should fall with parents and communities."
"The school is only a partner, therefore, responsibility is the parents and communities."
"Teach responsibility in the home; its what we need to help in class."
"Let schools put standards such as the Ten Commandments and moral/ethics in place again."
"It is different for schools to enforce or reinforce violence prevention when society dictates differently through TV, the media, sports, and organizations."
"The schools can't do it alone."
"Parents - get it together!"
"Starts at home."
"Parents, do not divorce. Stay together for your kids!"
"The school is a reflection of society. If students come to us with violent behavior, we can't be more effective than family and law enforcement."
"Education of all kinds begins at home with the parents."
"The primary responsibility begins at home and hopefully the responsibility will eventually become the individuals."
"It is essential for parent involvement and support in educational programs and the child's life."
"It is a parents responsibility to teach respect and values; the school's responsibility to model and nurture them.
"Parents need to provide a foundation and teach morality."
"We must have parent support in increasing respect--the schools nurture and encourage."
"Teachers can do their part, but parents MUST take responsibility! These kids are reflections of their parents."
"These are the percentages of responsibility and if any part fails to do their part, the whole child is not complete." (pie graph depicting parents with 50%, school with 30%, and the child and television/media with 10% each.)
"Practice what you preach."
"It needs to be a community effort. If parents and schools are not working together than it will not work."

Are Schools Responsible for a Civil Society?

Ranae Stetson, Texas Christian University Elton Stetson, Texas A & M - Commerce

Instructions: The purpose of this survey is to determine what impact, if any, of peer mediation and conflict resolution strategies taught in public school classrooms has on students' ability to manage conflict and enhance responsible citizenship. The survey will take about five minutes, and should be completed anonymously.

1. **Teaching Level: Elementary _____ Secondary _____ All Level _____**

2. **In your opinion, what is the primary cause of the increasing violence in our society in general and in schools in particular? Please rank your responses with 1 being most pertinent and 6 least important.**
   - _____Parents
   - _____Personal responsibility (student)
   - _____Television and Media
   - _____Video games
   - _____Boredom (in school or out)
   - _____Gang influence
   - _____Other _____

3. **In your opinion, has civil disobedience increased or decreased in schools over the past five years? On what do you base your opinion?**
   - _____ Increased
   - _____ Decreased

4. **In your opinion, has civil disobedience increased or decreased in YOUR school over the past five years? On what do you base your opinion?**
   - _____ Increased
   - _____ Decreased

5. **In your opinion, to what extent are schools responsible for developing a civil society?**
   a) Extensive
   b) Quite a bit
   c) Some
   d) Not at all

6. **What types of civil disobedience, discipline, or management problems occur most often in your classroom or on your campus? Rank all that apply with 1 being most common and 6 being least.**
   - _____Verbal disrespect from students
   - _____Refusal to do work
   - _____Threats of violence
   - _____Physical attacks
   - _____Disregard for authority
   - _____Other _____

7. **Relative to teaching conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation to students, does your school have any kind of organized program in place? If yes, please describe some of its attributes.**
   - _____Yes
   - _____No

8. **How extensively does your campus or district provide staff development or training in conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation? If not, should they?**
   - _____Extensive
   - _____Quite a bit
   - _____Some
   - _____Hardly any
   - _____Not at all

9. **Who is most responsible for providing teachers with training in conflict resolution, conflict management, or peer mediation to students. Please rank in order of your preference starting with 1= most responsible, 8 = lease responsible.**
   - _____Preservice teacher training programs
   - _____School districts
   - _____Individual school campuses
   - _____Law enforcement agencies
   - _____Social Service Agencies
   - _____Regional Education Service Centers
   - _____Outside Consultants
   - _____Teacher's Individual Responsibility to Learn

10. **What message would you like to send to the outside world about the schools' responsibility for violence prevention in our society?**